Contemporary Reading of the *Sirah*: Textuality and Contextuality [1]

***Dicky Sofjan**

Abstract

Much has been written about the Holy Prophet Muhammad SAAW ever since the second or third generation of Muslims following the demise of the Holy Prophet in 632 A.D. Classical biographical works on the Holy Prophet Muhammad SAAW—often called the *Sirah al-Nubuwwah* or simply *Sirah*—have been seen as central and essential to both the history and historiography of Islam, and altogether an inextricable part of the Muslim faith. For Muslims, the *Sunnah* (Prophetic tradition), wherein a significant part of the *Sirah* resides, in fact occupies the second most pertinent source of Truth after the Holy Quran. More specifically, the *qaul al-nabi* (Prophetic sayings), contained in the huge compendium of the *ahadist* (codified form of Prophetic tradition), provide a rich and diverse way in which both Muslims and students of Islam could 'reconnect' with the Holy Prophet Muhammad SAAW, and understand more comprehensively the context and circumstances, which surround the early rise of Islam in the 7th century. This paper therefore seeks to analyze contemporary readings of the *Sirah* behind the rich, multiple interpretations of the Quran and the Prophetic tradition. It attempts to confront the problem of textuality, within the philosophical domain, and answer the question of how contemporary readers of the *Sirah* could contextualize the plentiful lessons based on its honorable worldview that sprung directly from the sacred life and holy teachings of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW.

Keywords: Sirah, ahadist, prophetic tradition, Prophet Muhammad, textuality, contextualization

Introduction

Throughout the history of Islam, there have been many Muslim chroniclers, who wrote about the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAW), Ibnu Ishaq (704-767), Ibn Hisham (died 833 AD), Thabari (839-923 AD), and others who followed. Perhaps the best and earliest known work on the biography of the Prophet is by Muhammad ibn Ishaq who was known to have collected the sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, and was later commissioned by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur to write about the Holy Prophet. His work, entitled *Al-Mubtada' wa al-Ba'th wa al-Maghazi* (In the Beginning, the Mission (of the

* S.IP, MPP, M.A.,Ph.D, Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, Graduate School, Universitas Gadjah Mada

Prophet Muhammad) and the Expeditions), however, was lost. It was said that his disciple, Ziyad al-Bakka'i (died 799), made an amended copy of Ibn Ishaq's work, but that too was lost.

What remained were Ibn Hisham and Thabari's recensions or revised forms of manuscripts that usually contain commentaries. Producing what was entitled *Sirat al-Nabawiyah,* Ibn Hisham was particularly known as an Arab philologist, and a master grammarian. Meanwhile, Thabari was known more as a historian or chronicler with his celebrated *Tarikh al-Rasul wa al-Anbiya wa al-Mulk wa al-Khulafa* [Chronicles of the Messenger and Prophets and the Dominion and Caliphs] or otherwise known as *Tarikh al-Umam wa al-Mulk* (Chronicles of the Leaders and Dominion).

Having stated that, I will thus not dwell on what have already been well said and argued by many great scholars and historians of Islam, nor will I regurgitate the impressive and voluminous classical biographies of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW since the early beginnings of Islam. In fact, some scholars would argue that the *Sirah* literature developed alongside many other classical Islamic sciences, which in itself enriched different fields of intellectual investigation. It is clear, for instance, that the Sirah literature has enhanced the studies on the Quran, *tafsir* (exegesis), *ahadist, asbab al-nuzul* (occasion of the revelation), *asbab al-wurud* (occasion of the *ahadist*), *'ilm al-kalam* (theology), history of Islam in general, and many others.

What is more salient here would be to critically assess how readers of the *Sirah* could optimize their appraisal, understanding and implications on what went on more than 1400 years ago. Such an endeavor would of course go beyond the habitual method of questioning both the authenticity and reliability of the *Sirah,* against the texts of the Quran and the *ahadist* as the main sources of truth.[2] These efforts are obviously noble endeavors, and do have their merits within the Islamic religious tradition. However, I would argue here that the boundaries of the discussion and debate could be broadened through understanding textuality and apply the principle of contextuality. This way, readers could get a first hand experience in the expansion of their own understanding and realizing the implications of the text in question, in this case, the Sirah. Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) calls "the fusion of horizons" (*horizontverschmelzung*), which occupies philosophical hermeneutics. Gamader argues:

> Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic

> task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out.[3]

The Prophet

The Prophet Muhammad SAAW was a multidimensional figure with a highly complex, sophisticated personality and contested biography. It is therefore imperative to understand the 'forces' that helped mold the Prophet Muhammad SAAW's life, personality, trait, character, behaviors, habits and achievements. On the one hand, these forces strengthened His determination in building a vision for a better society or passion for radical social reforms. On the other hand, they also posed a challenge to the Prophet SAAW's audacity to confront the sectarian hegemonic powers that be, which led some to see Muhammad SAAW as a "trans-tribal statesman".[4] Thus, three kinds of forces existed: the temporal, moral and spiritual forces.

The temporal forces relate to the more visible yet relatively stable features that dictated Muhammad SAAW's life and character building. The harsh geography of the Arab dessert certainly played a major role in the way the Prophet SAAW saw his changing landscapes with the recurring dessert storms and strong winds. The 7th century Meccan political culture was also pertinent in the way Muhammad SAAW analyzed, and ultimately engaged in politics, which also defined to a large extent the nature of the Quranic text. The third component to the temporal forces had to do with the economic hardship the Prophet and his family endured throughout His career as the Messenger of God, as many had resisted against His message about a supposed 'new' faith that stood to affirm and reinforce the previous revelations.

Meanwhile, the moral forces point to a hard-to-deny fact about the Prophet Muhammad SAAW's own personal trait and character, as known by many of the people of Mecca themselves. Some would even went as far as arguing that the Prophet Muhammad SAAW's life was "in the full light of history" and that "detailed accounts of his life" are available to us.[5] This relates to His uniquely charismatic appeal and supreme personality trait, which got him the title of "the Trustworthy One" (*Al-Amin*). It is due to His trustworthiness that swayed the Arab converts to the peaceful message of Islam. More so, the final aspect involves his own mission to bring humanity into the fold of Islam by maintaining that His ultimate objective was essentially to teach and perfect humanity's ethics (*akhlak*).

The spiritual forces have to do with the Prophet Muhammad SAAW's intimate relationship with Allah and the Archangel Gabriel as the numinous being that revealed unto Him the secrets of the Heavens and the Earth. The miracle of the Quran as an expansive revelatory insight into human existence also provided Him with the kind of spiritual authority and legitimacy that no other person could have ever claimed, at least during His lifetime. As cited in the Quran in Ash-Shu'ra (42:52-53):

> And thus We have revealed to you an inspiration of Our command. You did not know what is the Book or (what is) faith., but We have made it a light by which We guide whom We will of Our servants. And indeed, (O Muhammad), you guide to a straight path. The path of Allah, to whom belongs whatever is in the Heavens and whatever is on the earth. Unquestionably, to Allah do (all) matters evolve.

Through the amalgamation of these three forces, the Prophet Muhammad SAAW was able to push for social reform, brought down the prevailing *jahiliyah* (ignorant) system and institutionalized Islam as the newly adopted Divinely-inspired way of life (*diinullah*). Through such institutionalization, the Prophet Muhammad SAAW was able to manifest the religion of Islam as a blessing for the multiverse and the whole creation (*rahmatan li'l'aalaamiin*).

Categorization of Biographies

Contemporary biographical authors of the Prophet SAAW's life have emerged from among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Previously, the latter, primarily came from the Occident, would at once be disparagingly labeled "Orientalists". Nowadays, as post-colonial studies have emerged to the forefront of intellectual debate in academia, much of the crude and brash form of Orientalism has subsided. This has occurred despite the fact that some scholars remain adamant about the 'benefits' and 'good' that Colonialism ushered, notably in spurting industrialization and ushering the modernization epoch in what had been known as the Third World.[6]

In terms of orientation, there are at least three categories of *Sirah* writing: first, the works of mostly committed classical Muslim scholars, who undoubtedly venerated the Prophet Muhammad SAAW, even to the extent of being wholly apologetic in some of the still questionable events that had taken place during the Prophetic years. The second category revolves around *Sirah* authors, whose sole intent was to demean the Messenger of God and dishonor His mission or the religion of Islam. These writers would usually resort to what research methodologists call

"selection bias", and cherry-pick fragments of Islamic history to undermine the figure of the Prophet SAAW or the early Muslim community. The third category involves *Sirah* writings authored by scholars of Islam, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The last category of *Sirah* usually involves a combination of veneration of the Prophet SAAW and objectification or scientification of the *Sunnah* through reinterpretation and reexamination of the *ahadist*.

The first category of Muslim biographers would naturally be Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham and Thabari. Indeed, there were also others, who wrote the fragments of the life of the Prophet SAAW, which for instance focused on his miraculous feats. Such works include: *A'lam al-Nubuwwah* by Al-Ma'mun; *Dala'il al-Nubuwwah* by al-Jahiz (died 870) and *Amarat al-Nubuwwah* by al-Juzajani's (died 873). From these works came a genre that emphasized on *dala'il* (proofs of Prophethood), which also contained fragmented information on the life of the Prophet, but could not be matched with the *Sirah* as an overtly intentional endeavor to depict the wholesome biography of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW.

Thus, the works of Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham and Thabari would probably represent the most complete, comprehensive and exhaustive information and knowledge materials on the life of the Prophet SAAW. They could perhaps be considered as the forerunners or precursors to *Sirah* studies, and were the first generation of Muslim scholars, who seriously saw the need and urgency for a complete biography of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW. Among the modern authors of Sirah are two notable writers: one is Egyptian Muhammad Hussayn Haikal)(1888-1956), who authored *Hayatu Muhammad*, which was originally published in Arabic in 1935.[7] The other is Martin Lings (1909-2005), a convert who changed his name to Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din. Lings's work entitled *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (1983) has been highly respected by the scholarly community, earning him accolades.

The second category of *Sirah* literature concerns those that were written to undermine the religious and spiritual status of the Prophet Muhammad. In contemporary Western English language books, the works of Robert Spencer (1962-now) are representative of such temper and negativity. Even the titles of his books— *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the world's most intolerant religion* (2006) and *Did Muhammad Exist? An inquiry into Islam's obscure origins* (2012) and are a clear giveaway to readers, who either detest Islam or merely desire to put down the holy legacy of the Prophet SAAW.

Such works, I would argue, merely rode on the rising tide of Islamophobia, which occurred after the September 11, 2001 tragedy that

saw Muslims and their faith on trial. The fear mongering was of course instrumental in justifying the so-called "war in terror" that the United States government subsequently waged. Here, for instance, Spencer (2006: 31) goes as far as questioning the very existence of Muhammad, wherein he argues:

> From a strictly historical standpoint, it is impossible to state with certainty even that a man named Muhammad actually existed, or if he did, that he did much or any of what is ascribed to him. In all likelihood he did exist—particularly in light of recorded aspects of his life that are acutely embarrassing for Muslims today (and, to varying degrees, throughout history) who are confronted with the difficulty of squaring them with modern sensibilities.

Furthermore, he argued that the "composite figure" of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW was "constructed later to give Arab imperialism a foundational mythos".[8]

In addition to the two categories above, there is a third group of works that are mostly written by Western, non-Muslim authors with a penchant for objectivity and critical-yet-positive appraisal of the Prophet SAAW's life. Three works come to mind. The first is a popular reading authored by self-help spiritual guru Deepak Chopra, who wrote *Muhammad: A Story of God's Messenger and the Revelation that Changed the World* (Enlightenment Series). Indeed, one of the strengths of such biographies is that they are highly accessible, and metes out some of the more controversial and problematic situations that may require in-depth research in various classical texts. Others are ones that are much more intellectually riveting and deep. Two names come to mind, namely Anne Marie Schimmel (1922–2003) and Karen Armstrong (1944-now). Both are female authors and non-Muslims, yet their writing clearly respects the Prophet SAAW. What is appealing about their work is their total respect and reverence, inadvertently defending Muhammad's Prophethood.

A professor of Divinity, Schimmel authored a much-celebrated work entitled *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (1983).[9] In her exposition, Schimmel expounded on the centrality of the veneration of the Prophet SAAW in Muslim piety. She highlighted the Prophet's multidimensional life experiences from birth to marriage to mystical journeys, which later became a subject of religious devotion for Muslims around the world. Schimmel also delved into various poetries, artistic expressions, symbolisms, rituals and festivities that mark the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW. Meanwhile

Armstrong, a Catholic-nun-turned-author, wrote two versions of the *Sirah* entitled *Muhammad*: *A Biography of the Prophet* (1991) and *A Prophet of Our Time* (2006). Although some of her commentaries did not sit well with some Muslims, the general tone of her work is appreciated.

As female writers of the *Sirah*, both Schimmel and Armstrong hold a special place among all other authors, as many outside of the Muslim community are genuinely curious about how the Prophet SAAW treated women and his wives as well as how Islam is generally seen as anti-women or at least often seen to undermine or even discriminate against women. This mostly relates to how Western, liberal authors' vehement bias and harsh criticisms against the Prophet SAAW on issues of his polygamous relationships and marriage to his youngest wife A'ishah, following the demise of his first and beloved businesswoman wife Khadijah.[10] With their reverence of the Prophet SAAW, their work no doubt gives positive light to Muhammad as a giant historical figure.

Indeed, there are other works that attempt to compile the various writing on the Prophet's biographies. One such work was a highly accessible compilation by Mohiuddin, who essentially drew from eight different contemporary authors of the Prophetic biography, namely Saf'iur Rahmad al-Mubarakpuri, Martin Lings, W. Montgomery Watt, Hamza Yusuf, Karen Armstrong, Tariq Ramadan, Reza Aslan, and Adila Salahi. The strength of Mohiuddin's work is that the text is made to respond to specific questions that are usually posed by those, who are learning about the Prophet of Islam SAAW. It tries to weave the revelation of the Quran into the life of Prophet Muhammad SAAW, and place the verses within a given and specific context that are easily readable and understandable.

Lings' (1983) work, entitled *Muhammad: His life based on the earliest sources*, draws much of his writing on original texts of 8-9th century work on the Prophetic biographies. Lings' book in fact won an award for the best biography of the Prophet in one of the National Seerat Conferences in Islamabad, Pakistan. Meanwhile, there is also the work of Ar-Raheeq al-Makhtum entitled *The Sealed Nectar*, which was published in 1976. Although this work received accolades for its diligence, it was not included in the Mohiuddin's work.

Rethinking and Contextualizing the Sirah

As much as one might want to believe that hoaxes, fake news and alternative facts were just invented after the recent rise of *Facebook* and various social media platforms, one must come to realize that they have been around since the rise of the literacy. At least throughout the history of religion, we have seen religious insult, offense and slander as well as

defamation, vilification and denigration of religious figures. It is therefore nothing new. Thus, one would have to be extra careful and hence more critical when dealing with the more obscure part of the early Islamic history and the more ambiguous elements in the Prophet SAAW's written biographies, which may call for closer reexamination and more rigorous investigation.

Such examples relate to the Prophet SAAW's attempted suicide, the story pertaining to how He had been influenced by magic spells and the subsequent episode on the 'Satanic' (*Gharaniq*) verses, for instance, need to be reexamined to avoid general misconceptions about the Prophet, the integrity of His whole mission and the revelation He brought to bear. The Gharaniq verses directly pertain to *An-Najm* (53:19-23). Here, the Prophet SAAW seemingly and supposedly endorsed the Goddesses of the Quraish tribe, namely al-Lat, 'Uzza and Manat, by saying: "These are the exalted *Gharaniq*. Their intercession is approved." In hearing this, the idol worshippers were pleased with the Prophet SAAW's statement, which was supposedly cast by the Devil. It was seen as a concession on the part of the Prophet SAAW, who wanted his people to accept Islam, while acknowledging the powers and authority of the Goddesses. In such an instance, if such reading of the *Sirah* is unchallenged or not reexamined, it could sooner rather than later prove detrimental to the foundations of Islamic traditional knowledge.

Now, whether or not one has reservations about these texts and readings, it is noteworthy to be reminded that these *Sirah* texts were produced by extraordinary individuals, writers or scholars, who were fallible or did not posses the quality of *ishmah* (infallibility), unlike the Prophet SAAW. In other words, they could prove to be wrong or that some of the contents of these 'historical facts' could have been politically motivated or made by those with feeble minds. In a cynical tone, Donner in his *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (1998) maintains that "Islamic histories emerged out of an ahistorical culture of Believers" and that it largely played a role in the political legitimation of the existing Muslim empire.

As acknowledged by all *Sirah* authors and readers, Islamic textual tradition plays an important role in the Muslim belief, praxis and development of worldview (*weltanschauung*), which ultimately determines the various perceptions of reality, predispositions toward surrounding religious events and textual interpretations. For most Muslims, the *Sirah*, the Quran and *ahadist* considered as sacred texts, and provide necessary cognitive and affective orientations in life. Hence, it would be unimaginable to practice Islam without familiarizing and engaging oneself with these sacred texts. The challenge is to ensure that

our reading of these religious texts is consistent with the correct understanding and teachings of Islam and more importantly conform as far as possible with objective historical facts or the Islamic common ethical framework.

It would be inconceivable for any Muslim to know how to actually conduct the *shalah* (prayers), which is mandatory for every Muslim, without referring to the *Sirah*, the Quran and *ahadist.* Likewise, it would be virtually impossible to study the Quran without engaging the *Sirah* and *ahadist* or other relevant texts that could elaborate the specific verses, especially those that are more ambiguous (*mutasyabihat*) than the fixed, clear or self-evident (*muhkamat*).

In the *ahadist*, many references point to the many evidence of the Prophet Muhammad SAAW's magnanimity toward others, even as they err or have intentionally wronged Him. On one occasion, the Prophet said that a 'woman of the night' would go to Heaven simply because she had given water to a thirsty dog. During the 'Opening of Mecca' (*Fath al-Makkah*), the Prophet Muhammad said that those who had fought Him, His family and companions prior to the day of conquest were safe from harm's way as long as they sought refuge in the house of Abu Sufyan, who had clearly shown enmity toward the Prophet SAAW.

Having said that, any effort to rethink and contextualize the *Sirah* would require a method and technique of reinterpretation. This assumes that the *Sirah*, along with its supporting texts, hides many invisible historical truths about Muhammad SAAW. Edward Said (1978:674-675) maintains that the task of interpreters is:

> … to make visible what is customarily invisible in the text, name the various mysteries, the rules, and the 'play' of its textuality … To say that the text's textual intention and integrity are invisible is to say that the text hides something, that the text implies, perhaps also states, embodies, represents, but does not immediately disclose something … Therefore the countervailing power of criticism is to bring the text back to a certain visibility."

As the *Sirah* is both a historical and religious text—which is supported by the Quran and *ahadist*—it may be useful to lend Jorge E. Gracia's "theory of textuality", where he maintained that "the primary and essential component of a satisfactory interpretation of divine revelation is theological" (1995: xii). As such, reading the *Sirah* could give rise to a new realization that understanding may not necessarily be the ultimate aim in religious texts. Instead, the text's main emphasis revolves around what Gracia calls the "implicative functions" of the text itself. The

implicative function refers to how readers use the text, manifest or apply it in their lives. This is of course different from the more conventional “historical” and “meaning functions” that sacred texts most often generate. Gracia (1995: 154) maintains that the implicative function is:

> … to produce in contemporary audiences acts of understanding whereby those audiences understand the implications of the meaning of the texts, regardless of whether the historical authors and the historical audiences were or were not aware of those implications.”

Concluding Remarks

One of the main pitfalls in reading religious or sacred texts is the tendency to always want to know the intention of the authors, which in many instances could be quite difficult or next to impossible. The other tendency is to seek for alternative meanings to certain texts that might be ‘hidden’ beneath the text itself or covered by layers of intentions of the author. By employing the implicative functions of the text, readers of the *Sirah* may well have privileged access to gain something that is ‘beyond understanding’. Such emphasis on the implicative function could even provide insights into the significance of the lessons learned in the *Sirah* that may prove to be highly contextual for contemporary readers, thus affecting the way they perceive and pay homage to the Prophet Muhammad SAAW.

References

[1]This article is a result of a reflection and presentations I made in two different *Sirah* international conferences. The first one was organized by Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony held in early December 2017. The other conference was organized by the Government College Women's University of Sialkot (GCWUS), which was held in March 2018. I would like to thank Dr. Sayeda Sadia and Tariq Ali, who have generously invited me to these events in Pakistan.

[2] In the *'Ulum al-Hadist* (Science of the Prophetic tradition), three subjects are usually dealt with: *qaul al-Nabi* (the Sayings of the Prophet), *fi'il al-Nabi* (the Actions of the Prophet) and *taqrir al-Nabi* (the Omissions or Silent Approval of the Prophet).

[3] Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed), Continuum, London, 2004: 305.

[4] Darity, William A. Jr.(eds),"Muhammad" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. 2nd Ed,Macmillan Reference USA, Detroit, 2008,5/308-309.

[5] See Muqtedar Khan, "The Legacy of Prophet Muhammad and the Issues of Pedophilia and Polygamy" in *Ijtihad*, June 9, 2003. According to Spencer, the phrase was first contextually used by Ernest Renan (1851).

[6] For instance, see Bruce Giley "The Case for Colonialism" in *Third World Quarterly*. Routledge. 2017.

[7] *Hayat Muhammad [Sejarah Hidup Muhamad]* has been translated into Bahasa Indonesia, and has become of one of the popular standard *Sirah* reading for regular Indonesians.

[8] Ibid.

[9] The book was originally written in German in 1981 with the title of *Und Muhammad Ist Sein Prophet.*

[10] See Khan (2003).